

Bill 96 and Indigenous Language Sovereignty in Quebec: Refusal, Resurgence, and Multilingual Justice

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Abstract

This paper examines Bill 96 and Quebec's language regime as a settler-colonial legal framework that elevates French as the 'common language' of public life while marginalizing Indigenous language sovereignty within Indigenous homelands. Situating Bill 96 within Canada's broader language governance, the paper briefly contrasts provincial language law with the federal *Indigenous Languages Act*, which links Indigenous language rights to self-determination and section 35 of the *Constitution Act, 1982*. Drawing on Indigenous scholarship on refusal and resurgence alongside critical discourse analysis of legal and institutional texts, the paper shows how "common language" rationales naturalize linguistic hierarchy and intensify barriers for Indigenous learners, including in communities where English functions as the primary non-Indigenous language alongside Indigenous language(s). The analysis highlights Indigenous resistance as generative praxis, expressed through community-led language resurgence, immersion pedagogy, mentorship, legal advocacy, and Indigenous-governed institutions. This argument is illustrated through examples from Kahnawà:ke and Listuguj, and Inuit education in Nunavik. Advancing multicultural justice rooted in Indigenous governance, the paper reimagines inclusion not as accommodation within settler systems but as relational responsibility and Indigenous-led futures.

Indigenization Statement

Janine Elizabeth Metallic is a first-language Mi'gmaw speaker from Listuguj Mi'gmaq First Nation in Gespe'ge'wa'gi, Mi'gma'gi, where most of her family and relatives reside. She uses Listuguj orthography in naming her community and territory and she writes from responsibilities grounded in Indigenous language sovereignty and relational accountability. She works at McGill University in Montreal, in the Department of Integrated Studies in Education (DISE), Faculty of Education, on the unceded lands of Tiohtià:ke, with longstanding ties to Haudenosaunee and Anishinaabeg peoples (McGill University Office of Indigenous Initiatives, n.d.). Helal Hossain Dhali is a non-Indigenous scholar; his role in this manuscript is supportive and accountable,

contributing conceptual and policy analysis in collaboration with Janine Metallic and under the guidance of Indigenous scholarship. This paper is a conceptual analysis drawing on published Indigenous scholarship and publicly available policy/legal texts; it is not a report of new community-based data.

Introduction

Quebec's interculturalism policy, alongside its language regime, most notably Bill 101, the *Charter of the French Language*, C.Q.L.R. c. C-11 (Bill 101), and its recent amendment, *An Act respecting French, the official and common language of Québec* (2022 [Bill 96]), is often framed as a defensive response to Anglophone dominance in North America. These laws position French as the 'common language' of public life, education, and governance, and are widely justified as necessary protections for Francophone identity and survival. Viewed through an Indigenous lens, however, they are not simply cultural safeguards but settler-colonial technologies that reinscribe linguistic hierarchies, erode Indigenous language sovereignty, and impose assimilationist demands within Indigenous homelands.

This paper argues that Quebec's language regime constitutes a contemporary site of Indigenous resistance, where communities actively refuse state-imposed frameworks of inclusion and enact alternative futures grounded in sovereignty, resurgence, and relational responsibility (Alfred, 2023; Simpson, 2014). While the *Charter of the French Language* (Bill 101) and Bill 96 claim neutrality and universality, they operate within colonial logics that privilege settler nation-building projects (whether Anglophone or Francophone) while rendering Indigenous languages peripheral, optional, or invisible (Battiste, 1998, 2019; Coulthard, 2014a, 2014b). In response, Indigenous Peoples in Quebec engage in forms of resistance that are neither reactive nor symbolic, but generative practices of governance, social development, and world-making (Alfred, 2023; Simpson, 2014).

Canada's official multiculturalism and Quebec's interculturalism are often presented as progressive models of diversity management (Ghosh & Galczynski, 2014). Multiculturalism, adopted federally in 1971, celebrates cultural plurality while situating Indigenous peoples as one cultural group among many, thereby reducing Indigenous nationhood to identity rather than political sovereignty (Coulthard, 2014a, 2014b; Simpson, 2014). Interculturalism, Quebec's preferred framework, similarly emphasizes integration into a dominant public culture organized around the French language and secularism (Bouchard, 2015). Although these models differ rhetorically, both remain rooted in settler-colonial assumptions that foreground immigrant integration and settler belonging while marginalizing Indigenous jurisdiction, treaty relationships, and inherent rights. Indigenous scholars have long argued that such frameworks offer recognition without power, visibility without authority, and inclusion without justice (Coulthard, 2014a, 2014b; Simpson, 2014).

Drawing on Indigenous scholarship on resurgence, refusal, and the colonial politics of recognition (Alfred, 2023; Battiste, 1998, 2019; Coulthard, 2014a, 2014b; Simpson, 2014; Tuck & Yang, 2014), this paper conceptualizes Indigenous resistance not as opposition to the state alone, but as a relational and future-oriented praxis. Resistance here takes shape through language revitalization, immersion pedagogy, mentorship, legal advocacy, and the creation of Indigenous-governed educational institutions (MacDonald, 2024; Sarkar, 2017; Stacey, 2024). These practices exceed demands for accommodation within colonial systems and instead assert Indigenous authority over language, education, and social development (Alfred, 2023; Battiste, 2019; Simpson, 2014). Language, in this context, is not a cultural artifact to be preserved but a living system that carries law, land-based knowledge, kinship obligations, and responsibilities to future generations.

Focusing on Indigenous communities in Quebec, the paper examines how Indigenous-led language resurgence operates as both theory and praxis of resistance (Alfred, 2023; Simpson, 2014). Community-based immersion programs, pedagogies of joy and mentorship, and Indigenous-governed institutions demonstrate how language revitalization functions as a form of social development grounded in collective autonomy and dignity (MacDonald, 2024; Sarkar, 2017; Stacey, 2024; Stacey & Whitebean, 2018). These initiatives directly challenge the assimilationist logic of Quebec's language laws and expose the limitations of state-led inclusion models that fail to address Indigenous sovereignty (Alfred, 2023; Coulthard, 2014a; Simpson, 2014).

This paper contributes to the *Journal of Indigenous Social Development* special issue on Indigenous Resistance by centering language resurgence as a site where resistance, governance, and futurity converge (Alfred, 2023; Battiste, 2019; Simpson, 2014). Rather than treating Indigenous Peoples as stakeholders within provincial language policy, the analysis foregrounds Indigenous refusal of settler recognition frameworks and the enactment of Indigenous-led futures beyond colonial inclusion. By situating Quebec as a specific site of struggle, the paper demonstrates how Indigenous resistance disrupts settler narratives of neutrality and progress, and how Indigenous social development is already being enacted through language, relational accountability, and sovereign practice (Alfred, 2023; Battiste, 2019; Simpson, 2014).

For readers outside Canada, it is important to note that language governance is shaped by multiple regimes, including the *Official Languages Act* (1985); *Indigenous Languages Act*, (2019); and Quebec's *Charter of the French Language*, C.Q.L.R. c. C-11, as amended by *An Act respecting French, the official and common language of Québec* (2022, [Bill 96]). Federally, the *Official Languages Act* (1985), establishes English and French as Canada's official languages within federal institutions and sets out rights and duties related to services, justice, and language

of work. The *Indigenous Languages Act* (2019), responds to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's ([TRC], 2015b) Calls to Action #13–15 and recognizes that rights related to Indigenous languages are linked to rights recognized and affirmed under section 35 of the *Constitution Act, 1982*. It creates an Office of the Commissioner of Indigenous Languages and sets out federal responsibilities to work with Indigenous governing bodies to support Indigenous-led language work through long-term funding and agreements. Provincially, the *Charter of the French Language*, as amended by *An Act respecting French, the official and common language of Québec* (2022, [Bill 96]), affirms French as the only official and common language of Quebec and expands French-language requirements across public administration, education, and other domains. Taken together, these legislative approaches reveal a fundamental tension between competing language policy orientations: federal legislation increasingly affirms Indigenous languages as integral to rights and self-determination, while Quebec's approach to language governance prioritizes the protection of French without recognizing Indigenous language sovereignty on its own terms (Indigenous Languages Act, 2019; An Act respecting French, the official and common language of Québec, 2022).

The guiding questions for this paper are: (1) How do Quebec's interculturalism and language laws reproduce settler-colonial hierarchies that marginalize Indigenous language sovereignty? (2) In what ways do Indigenous communities resist these regimes through language resurgence as governance and social development? and (3) How do Indigenous-led educational and institutional practices enact futures grounded in collective autonomy, dignity, and liberation?

Methodology

This study adopts a conceptual approach, drawing on scholarly texts, policy documents, and legal frameworks to develop an Indigenous-led framework for inclusion. The authors

selected key works by Indigenous scholars and theorists, including but not limited to Alfred (2023), Simpson (2014), Coulthard (2014a, 2014b), Battiste (2019), MacDonald (2024), and Robinson et al. (2023), based on their significant contributions to Indigenous resurgence, refusal, recognition politics, and decolonizing education. The selected texts were analyzed thematically, with attention to concepts such as language sovereignty, linguistic marginalization, and settler-colonial relations.

Text selection was guided by two criteria: (1) relevance to Indigenous resurgence/refusal and the colonial politics of recognition in relation to language, education, and governance; and (2) ongoing influence in Indigenous studies and allied fields as foundational or field-shaping works. Policy and legal texts were selected for their direct effects on language and education in Quebec and Canada (e.g., the *Charter of the French Language* (Bill 101); *An Act respecting French, the official and common language of Québec* (2022, Bill 96); and federal language legislation). The analysis proceeded in two stages. First, we conducted a close reading of the selected texts and produced analytic memos to identify recurring concepts and claims (e.g., sovereignty, recognition/refusal, linguistic hierarchy, assimilation, resurgence). Second, we used a critical discourse analysis approach (Fairclough, 2013; Rogers, 2004) to examine how policy text and public rationales naturalize particular hierarchies (e.g., “common language,” neutrality, integration) and how these discourses position Indigenous peoples and languages in relation to settler authority. Themes were refined through iterative comparison across scholarly and policy materials, ensuring that the final thematic structure reflects patterns in the selected texts rather than a pre-set framework.

For clarity, we use key terms as follows. In line with McCarty and Nicholas (2014), we use “language reclamation” as an umbrella term for Indigenous-led efforts to recover languages that have been forcibly subordinated through colonization; this includes revitalization of

languages still in use, revival of languages no longer spoken as a first language, and broader efforts to reverse language shift (Fishman, 1991). We use “language revitalization” more narrowly to refer to strengthening and expanding everyday use of a language that still has speakers. We use “law/legislation” to refer to enacted statutes (e.g., the *Charter of the French Language* (Bill 101) and its amendments), and “policy” to refer to administrative frameworks and institutional practices that put into practice or interpret legislation (e.g., guidance, approaches to implementation, and enforcement priorities).

Building on the two-stage analysis described above, we use a critical discourse analysis approach (Fairclough, 2013; Rogers, 2004) alongside Indigenous resurgence and refusal scholarship to examine how Quebec’s language laws and inclusion frameworks construct linguistic hierarchy and legitimacy. The analysis that follows is organized thematically to show how these discourses operate historically and in the present, and how Indigenous-led language resurgence enacts alternatives grounded in sovereignty and relational responsibility.

This paper synthesizes scholarship on Canadian settler colonialism, decolonizing education, and recognition politics to examine how Quebec’s policies reflect broader colonial patterns of linguistic erasure. Drawing on works by the TRC (2015a), Battiste (1998, 2019), Coulthard (2014a, 2014b), Simpson (2014), and others, this analysis highlights the tension between Francophone protectionism and the ongoing marginalization of Indigenous and immigrant voices. Perspectives from Alfred’s (2023) Indigenous resurgence, Simpson’s (2014) refusal strategies, Coulthard’s (2014a) critique of recognition politics, and MacDonald’s (2024) focus on decolonizing education in Inuit Nunangat support an Indigenous-led approach grounded in Indigenous agency and cultural sovereignty.

The analysis begins by critiquing multiculturalism and interculturalism within global settler-pluralist frameworks, then examines historical and ongoing linguistic assimilation, linking

residential schools to the *Charter of the French Language* (Bill 101) and *An Act respecting French, the official and common language of Québec* (2022, [Bill 96]). Using recognition and refusal theory (Coulthard, 2014a, 2014b; Simpson, 2014), the paper explores how language laws sustain colonial hierarchies, assesses their impact on Indigenous and immigrant communities, and concludes by advocating for Indigenous-led inclusion grounded in sovereignty and multilingual justice.

Canadian Multiculturalism: A Eurocentric Framework of Containment

Canada's official multiculturalism, long celebrated as the Canadian model of diversity, is deeply rooted in Eurocentric ideas and functions as a containment strategy rather than genuine inclusion (MacDonald, 2014). Multiculturalism presents itself as inclusion but confines Indigenous Peoples to the realm of "culture" rather than recognizing their sovereignty, weakening treaty relationships and self-governance (Coulthard, 2014a, 2014b; MacDonald, 2014). As Ghosh and Galczynski (2014) show, traditional multicultural education often takes a "museum approach" (p. 60), viewing culture as a fixed artifact instead of a living relationship grounded in land and sovereignty. This static view allows the state to symbolically include Indigenous identities while excluding them from political recognition, thereby maintaining settler authority (Coulthard, 2014a, 2014b; MacDonald, 2014). Rather than offering a necessarily partial global comparison, the remainder of this section stays with how Canadian diversity frameworks manage Indigenous difference while leaving settler-colonial power intact (Coulthard, 2014a, 2014b; MacDonald, 2014).

Indigenous critiques sharpen this analysis by showing how multiculturalism redefines Indigenous nationhood as cultural expression rather than political sovereignty, reducing land-based, treaty-grounded jurisdiction to an individualistic liberal rights framework (Coulthard,

2014a, 2014b; Simpson, 2014). Multiculturalism's focus on "diversity" conceals the structural conditions in which Indigenous Peoples continue to resist colonial dispossession. This becomes clear through language resurgence: Indigenous languages are not merely symbolic markers but living systems that connect identity, land, and governance (Metallic, 2017; Stacey, 2024). For example, they carry intergenerational responsibilities extending "to the faces yet to come . . . our future generations" within Rotinonhsión:ni worldviews (Stacey, 2024, p. 75). Yet state languages, English and French, maintain dominance across institutions, perpetuating the colonial legacy of Indigenous language suppression exemplified by residential and Indian Day Schools (TRC, 2015a; Stacey & Whitebean, 2018).

Community language plans reveal that revitalization depends on supporting speakers to expand their repertoires across contexts and creating conditions for intergenerational transmission in homes and schools (Stacey, 2024; Stacey & Whitebean, 2018). Yellow Bird's (2013) concept of neurodecolonization challenges the multicultural celebration of "resilience," arguing that such praise often masks the failure to dismantle colonial cognitive structures or integrate Indigenous epistemologies into mainstream curriculum. Stacey (2024) further demonstrates that effective language revitalization must be Indigenous-led, community-driven, and grounded in Indigenous priorities rather than state-defined cultural recognition. Referring to Smith (2012), Stacey (2024) emphasizes that community leadership is essential for determining our own priorities internally and fostering dialogue within Indigenous communities. This exposes the limits of multiculturalism: although it encourages cultural expression, it does not shift power, restore land, or dismantle extractive systems that hinder linguistic and national resurgence (Coulthard, 2014a, 2014b; MacDonald, 2014; Simpson, 2014).

In sum, Indigenous resurgence in language, kinship, women's leadership, and governance is a sovereign act that surpasses the symbolic boundaries of multiculturalism. Multiculturalism

allows cultural visibility but neglects jurisdiction; it recognizes trauma but not the underlying structures causing it; it celebrates diversity without addressing the colonial inequities that continue to burden Indigenous communities with reconstructing what state institutions sought to erase. True justice requires moving beyond multicultural inclusion towards frameworks grounded in Indigenous self-determination, land relations, and vibrant governance rooted in Indigenous languages.

Historical Legacies of Colonial Assimilation in Canadian Education

The roots of linguistic marginalization in Canada originate from centuries of forced assimilation policies targeting Indigenous languages and knowledge systems. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission's (2015a) final report describes residential schools as instruments of "cultural genocide" (p. 3), noting that the system sought to separate Indigenous children from their families, communities, and languages. More than 150,000 Indigenous children attended residential schools between the 1870s and the late twentieth century. In Quebec, Indigenous children were likewise subjected to residential schooling and related assimilationist policies that disrupted intergenerational language transmission, family life, and community continuity (TRC, 2015a).

Young (2015) deepens this critique by analyzing the motto "to kill the Indian in the child" (p. 65) as a biopolitical tool of subject formation. Linguistic bans fractured children's identities, fostering internalized self-hatred and alienation (TRC, 2015a; Young, 2015). Battiste's early work (1998) identified colonial education cycles as demanding a complete makeover of identity, including linguistic conformity. Her more recent scholarship (2019) expands this analysis by advocating for nourishing Indigenous epistemologies and restoring intellectual sovereignty as essential to decolonizing education. Together, these insights reveal how the *Charter of the*

French Language (Bill 101) and *An Act respecting French, the official and common language of Québec* (2022, Bill 96) mirror this legacy by prioritizing French without exemptions for Indigenous languages, reinforcing hierarchies that place French above ancestral languages (Battiste, 1998, 2019; *An Act respecting French, the official and common language of Québec*, 2022). Yet Indigenous communities have transformed language work into a site of resistance and healing. Rhonda Hopkins from Kenjgewin Teg explains how language work “has healing components in it . . . people actually got healed from the language” (McIvor, 2024b, 0:00-0:09). Her reflection shows that language revitalization is not only pedagogical but also deeply reparative, enabling learners to reclaim identity and challenge deficit narratives imposed by assimilationist education (Battiste, 1998, 2019; McIvor, 2024b). Seen in this light, revitalization becomes a sovereign act that counters the colonial logic embedded in Quebec’s language laws.

The Politics of Recognition and Refusal in Settler Colonialism

Coulthard’s (2014a, 2014b) critique of recognition politics provides a powerful lens for understanding how Quebec’s language laws sustain colonial structures while appearing to promote inclusion. In *Red Skin, White Masks*, Coulthard (2014a) argues that state-led recognition, such as granting official status to French but marginalizing Indigenous languages, is a superficial gesture that ultimately hides ongoing dispossession. This form of recognition traps Indigenous communities in a dependency cycle, where linguistic rights rely on assimilation into the settler state’s terms. Bill 96, which officially frames French as the common language of the province, exemplifies this logic by restricting English-language services and failing to protect Indigenous languages, thereby reinforcing colonial hierarchies.

Coulthard (2014b) deepens this analysis by invoking Fanon’s (1986) concept of self-recognition (as cited in Coulthard, 2014b) to advocate for decolonial practices that reject state

validation. We draw on this insight to argue that Indigenous futures must be created outside colonial narratives and recognition frameworks. This perspective resonates with Alfred's (2023) resurgence framework, which emphasizes renewal through land-based practices and language reclamation, rejecting recognition as a trap that diminishes sovereignty. In Quebec, this resistance is evident in First Nations' legal challenges to Bill 96, which community leaders have framed as "cultural genocide" for overriding treaty rights to ancestral languages (Bruemmer, 2022; Saint-Arnaud, 2023).

Using Simpson's (2014) framework, we argue that the mandate for French proficiency in English CEGEPs under Bill 96 illustrates how state-imposed language requirements reproduce colonial authority by disregarding Indigenous jurisdiction over education and language. Simpson (2014) defines refusal as a generative political stance that rejects the settler-colonial politics of recognition and asserts Indigenous sovereignty. Applying this lens, we see Indigenous opposition to Bill 96 not as passive resistance but as an active assertion of nested sovereignties, where Indigenous political orders persist within and apart from the Quebec state. Everyday acts of refusal, such as challenging provincial language laws and prioritizing Indigenous languages in education, interrupt the settler narrative that French primacy is neutral or inevitable. These refusals create space for Indigenous futures grounded in their own laws, languages, and governance rather than assimilationist frameworks.

Quebec's Language Laws as a Site of Indigenous Resistance

Quebec's language laws (most notably the *Charter of the French Language* (Bill 101) and Bill 96) are frequently framed as protective measures designed to safeguard French in an English-dominated North American context (Bouchard, 2015; An Act respecting French, the official and common language of Québec, 2022). Within this narrative, the promotion of French as the

official and common language is cast as a neutral or even emancipatory project of cultural survival (An Act respecting French, the official and common language of Québec, 2022).

However, from an Indigenous perspective, these laws operate as settler-colonial instruments of governance that impose linguistic hierarchies and reproduce assimilationist logics on Indigenous peoples within their own territories (Coulthard, 2014a, 2014b; Simpson, 2014). Far from being neutral, Quebec's language regime advances a Francophone nation-building project that renders Indigenous language sovereignty peripheral, negotiable, or invisible (Coulthard, 2014a, 2014b; MacDonald, 2014).

Bill 96 intensifies this colonial dynamic by extending French-only requirements across education, healthcare, public services, and postsecondary pathways (An Act respecting French, the official and common language of Québec, 2022). Measures such as enrollment caps in English Collège d'enseignement général et professionnels (CEGEPs), mandatory French coursework for Indigenous students, expanded enforcement powers for the Office québécois de la langue française (OQLF), and restrictions on accessing services in languages other than French deepen structural barriers for Indigenous communities (An Act respecting French, the official and common language of Québec, 2022). These provisions disproportionately affect Indigenous students whose linguistic trajectories have been shaped by colonial disruptions, including residential school, Indian day schools, and provincial educational systems that historically suppressed Indigenous languages while privileging English or French (TRC, 2015a; Stacey & Whitebean, 2018).

Indigenous students in Quebec navigate complex linguistic realities (Metallic, 2017; TRC, 2015a). Many First Nations and Inuit learners rely on English in addition to their ancestral languages as a result of intergenerational language loss imposed by colonial schooling (Metallic, 2017; Stacey & Whitebean, 2018; TRC, 2015a). At the same time, communities are actively

leading revitalization efforts to restore Indigenous languages through immersion education, mentorship, and land-based learning; in Kahnawà:ke, for example, Kanien'kéha immersion schooling and community-based language planning illustrates how resurgence is enacted through Indigenous-controlled pedagogy and governance (McIvor, 2024a; Stacey, 2024). Bill 96's rigid language requirements penalize Indigenous students for colonial conditions not of their making, delaying graduation, restricting access to preferred programs, and undermining community-led language resurgence (An Act respecting French, the official and common language of Québec, 2022; Stacey & Whitebean, 2018). As Indigenous students have articulated, these measures frame them as linguistic outsiders within their own homelands (Laframboise, 2024). In communities where English has become the primary non-Indigenous language alongside Indigenous language(s), French-only requirements can operate as an additional barrier to education and services, compounding longstanding structural harms linked to Indigenous language marginalization (An Act respecting French, the official and common language of Québec, 2022; TRC, 2015a).

Indigenous resistance to Quebec's language regime has been explicit, organized, and unapologetic (Bruemmer, 2022; Laframboise, 2024; Saint-Arnaud 2023). First Nations leaders, students, and organizations have publicly challenged Bill 96 through petitions, walkouts, legal challenges, and public statements that identify the legislation as a continuation of colonial assimilationist policies (Bruemmer, 2022; Laframboise, 2024; Saint-Arnaud, 2023). The Assembly of First Nations Quebec and Labrador ([AFNQL]), 2021) and other First Nations education leaders have described aspects of the law as constituting "cultural genocide" and have argued that the reforms infringe Indigenous rights to self-determination, including the right to teach children their ancestral languages and to maintain and revitalize those languages (Bruemmer, 2022; Saint-Arnaud, 2023). Indigenous students have likewise mobilized to contest

enrollment caps and French proficiency mandates, presenting their resistance as a defense of dignity, jurisdiction, and self-determination rather than a rejection of the French language itself (Laframboise, 2024; Saint-Arnaud, 2023).

These acts of refusal align with Simpson's (2014) conception of Indigenous resistance as generative rather than oppositional. Indigenous opposition to Bill 96 is not merely reactive; it constitutes an assertion of nested sovereignties that persist despite provincial claims to linguistic authority. By refusing to accept French as the unquestioned 'common language,' Indigenous communities expose the colonial assumption that settler languages can supersede Indigenous laws, languages, and governance systems. This refusal disrupts the narrative that Quebec's language laws are benign or universally applicable and reveals their function as tools of colonial ordering (Coulthard, 2014a, 2014b; Simpson, 2014).

Alongside legal and political resistance, Indigenous communities enact sovereignty through language resurgence as praxis (Simpson, 2014; Stacey, 2024). For example, in Kahnawà:ke, immersion programs such as Karonhianónnhna Tsi Ionterihwaienstákhwa demonstrate how Indigenous-controlled education operates as a form of governance and social development (McIvor, 2024a; Stacey, 2024). Educators emphasize play-based learning, mentorship, and relational pedagogy to foster confidence, joy, and linguistic agency among children (Kahnawake Education Center, 2024a, 2024b). These practices counter colonial language hierarchies by centering Indigenous epistemologies and restoring intergenerational responsibilities tied to language, land, and kinship (Stacey, 2024; Stacey & Whitebean, 2018).

Mi'gmaq-led initiatives in Listuguj, including participatory language planning and community-based pedagogical work, have similarly prioritized community authority over curriculum, teacher training, and language planning (Metallic, 2017; Sarkar, 2017; Sarkar et al., 2009). Through participatory approaches and Indigenous governance structures, these programs

position language revitalization as a collective responsibility rather than a state-managed cultural project (Metallic, 2017; Sarkar, 2017; Sarkar et al., 2009). Inuit educators in Nunavik advance parallel refusals by grounding education in Inuit Qaujimajatuqangit and advocating for language policies that uphold Inuit self-determination and cultural continuity (MacDonald, 2024). Across these contexts, language resurgence is not a symbolic gesture but a material practice of Indigenous social development, rebuilding governance, strengthening community cohesion, and imagining futures beyond colonial constraint (MacDonald, 2024; Metallic, 2017; Sarkar, 2017; Sarkar et al., 2009; Simpson, 2014).

The exclusionary logic of Quebec's language laws also affects non-Francophone newcomers and racialized communities, particularly through restrictions on accessing services in languages other than French (An Act respecting French, the official and common language of Québec, 2022). While these impacts reveal broader injustices within Quebec's language regime, Indigenous resistance exposes a deeper colonial contradiction: a province that asserts linguistic vulnerability while denying Indigenous Peoples their inherent linguistic and political rights (Assembly of First Nations Quebec-Labrador, 2021; Bruemmer, 2022; Saint-Arnaud, 2023). In this context, Indigenous resurgence challenges both Anglophone and Francophone settler claims to linguistic primacy (Coulthard, 2014a, 2014b; Simpson, 2014). Taken together, Indigenous resistance to Quebec's language laws reveals the limits of interculturalism as a framework for justice (Bouchard, 2015; Coulthard, 2014a, 2014b; Simpson, 2014). Rather than seeking accommodation within provincial policy, Indigenous communities enact refusal, resurgence, and governance through language (Simpson, 2014). These practices position language revitalization as a site of struggle, dignity, and futurity where Indigenous Peoples assert authority over their own social development and define the terms of coexistence on their lands (MacDonald, 2024; Metallic, 2017; Sarkar, 2017; Sarkar et al., 2009; Stacey, 2024). In doing so, Indigenous

resistance exposes Quebec's language regime not merely as a protective measure, but as an ongoing colonial project contested through everyday acts of linguistic sovereignty (Bruemmer, 2022; Laframboise, 2024; Saint-Arnaud, 2023).

Language as a Tool of Colonial Violence and Decolonization

Language is central to how colonial systems operate and how communities rebuild. Policies that restrict Indigenous languages function as tools of erasure and dispossession, affecting education, health, and social services. A growing body of peer-reviewed research links Indigenous language use and revitalization with wellbeing across multiple domains, including mental, physical, and community health outcomes (Whalen et al., 2022). Community-level evidence also suggests that language vitality can function as a protective factor for youth wellbeing, as seen in a British Columbia study reporting lower youth suicide rates in communities with higher Indigenous language knowledge (Hallett et al., 2007). Brant's (2023) analysis of Indigenous Maternal Pedagogies shows that classrooms and learning spaces are often entangled with colonial harms, and that language policies contribute to environments that are not culturally safe or responsive to Indigenous learners and families. In Quebec, these harms compound when French-only requirements limit access to timely and culturally appropriate services and educational pathways, especially for learners whose linguistic trajectories have been shaped by state-led disruption.

Community documentation from *Skátne ionkwaié:ton* in Kahnawà:ke details both the historical prohibition of Indigenous languages in residential and day schools and the continuing impacts of that suppression on confidence, achievement, and participation (Stacey & Whitebean, 2018). Survivors recall punishment and isolation for speaking their languages and report long-lasting fear that still shapes how youth approach schooling. Battiste (1998, 2019) calls for

nourishing Indigenous epistemologies and protecting education as a right that restores intellectual and linguistic sovereignty, rather than treating language as an optional cultural add-on. This framing places language reclamation at the heart of decolonizing practice.

Alongside accounts of harm, there is sustained resurgence. Community-based programs and networks demonstrate collective care, hope, and pragmatic strategies. As Alwyn Jeddore of Mi'kmaw Kina'matnewey reflects, “our ancestors fought so hard to get where we are today that we still have our culture, we all still have our languages” (McIvor, 2024c, 2:53–3:01). His remarks situate language work within ongoing responsibilities to those who came before and those who will follow. Kahtehrón:ni Iris Stacey, Curriculum Team Coordinator with the Kahnawà:ke Education Centre, similarly emphasizes the power of community dialogue that brings teachers, curriculum developers, and administrators together to plan, celebrate successes, and address challenges collectively (McIvor, 2024a). Taken together, these perspectives show that language revitalization is not simply a curricular initiative. It is a political and relational practice that rebuilds governance, strengthens community authority in education, and renews responsibilities to future generations (McIvor, 2024a, 2024c; Stacey, 2024; Stacey & Whitebean, 2018).

Settler Ignorance and Pedagogical Responses

Rice et al. (2022) describe settler ignorance as an “epistemological knot” (p. 15) where forces of power, knowledge, and emotion are inextricably entangled to resist transformation. This systemic resistance persists even when public institutions pledge to implement the TRC (2015b) Calls to Action, often treating reconciliation as a performative policy milestone rather than a structural imperative. Following Rice et al. (2022), we use the term settler ignorance analytically to critique structural and institutional patterns that uphold settler-colonial power, rather than to

ascribe individual intent or character (see also Nelson & Godlewska, 2023; Forcione et al., 2025). In Quebec, this dynamic manifests clearly in the refusal to grant Indigenous language exemptions under Bill 96. This policy position frames French language protectionism as fundamentally incompatible with Indigenous linguistic rights, dismissing ancestral language sovereignty over the land (Assembly of First Nations Quebec-Labrador, 2021). Ultimately, such reasoning reflects a narrow, colonial understanding of language as a tool of cultural uniformity, failing to recognize it as a relational system deeply tied to land, governance, and intergenerational responsibility.

Pedagogical responses to settler ignorance must go beyond surface-level curriculum reform. As Mullen (2020) and Tuck and Yang (2014) argue, developing critical consciousness is insufficient without material shifts in power and recognition of Indigenous jurisdiction. Decolonial pedagogy requires restoring Indigenous authority over education and embedding learning within land and treaty relationships.

Indigenous educators at Karonhianónhnha Tsi Ionterihwaienstákhkwa, a Kanien'kéha immersion school in Kahnawà:ke, exemplify this resistance through relational and joyful practices that disrupt colonial language hierarchies. Resource teacher Iakotetshén:'en Jacobs explains how play-based learning fosters confidence and linguistic agency:

Taking any of your classroom lists and putting it into a game and making it random, maybe they don't make sense, like I said, you have the colour purple, and you have a moose . . . you know you can't say it . . . it's not a true colour of a moose, right? So that student has to be creative, and they have to pull from their word bank and to be able to apply it. And so, it becomes fun and they get to count how many words that they use in a sentence, and it builds their vocabulary and it encourages them to speak. (Kahnawake Education Center, 2024b, 2:47–3:25)

Immersion teacher coach Kanerahtóntha Leith Mahkewa described her role as “really to kind of mirror what it is the teacher is doing so that they can see what it is and really take stock in all the good work that they're doing on a daily basis for the students” (Kahnawake Education Center, 2024a, 1:44–1:55). This perspective reflects a relational approach to professional learning that

resonates with Indigenous pedagogies. Rather than positioning knowledge as something transmitted from expert to novice, the coach's role is to create space for reflection, recognition, and growth through respectful relationships. The act of mirroring honours teachers' existing knowledge and strengths while supporting self-determined learning and development. Such relational practices are important in Indigenous language revitalization contexts, where teaching and learning are grounded in relationships, reciprocity, and the recognition of the gifts and capacities that learners and educators already bring to the learning community.

These practices are not merely pedagogical innovations; they are sovereign acts of resurgence. By centering relationality, joy, and community authority, immersion education challenges the colonial logic embedded in Bill 96 and asserts Indigenous jurisdiction over language and learning. Addressing settler ignorance, therefore, requires more than symbolic gestures; it demands structural change that positions Indigenous nations as decision-makers in shaping linguistic and educational futures.

Towards Indigenous-Led Inclusion and Self-Determination

Efforts toward inclusion in Quebec and Canada must go beyond symbolic accommodation and center Indigenous authority over language, education, and governance. Across Indigenous scholarship and community-led initiatives, a consistent message emerges: meaningful inclusion is inseparable from sovereignty. As Robinson et al. (2023) argue, Inuit cultural resurgence through art, media, and pedagogy is not a contribution to a Canadian mosaic; it is a sovereign assertion of Inuit futurity. This perspective aligns with Alfred's (2023) resurgence framework and Simpson's (2014) politics of refusal, both of which reject state-managed multiculturalism and insist that Indigenous futures be guided by Indigenous priorities.

Language sovereignty is foundational to this vision. Rotinonhsión:ni scholars, for example, emphasize that Kanien’kéha is not merely a communication tool but a living system that binds identity, land, and governance through intergenerational responsibilities “to the faces yet to come” (Stacey, 2024). Similarly, Metallic (2017) demonstrates that young adult Mi’gmaq learners view language as central to belonging and cultural continuity, not as cultural ornamentation. This finding underscores the broader implications of Indigenous language learning for community life and collective responsibility. Collectively, these insights suggest that revitalization cannot be achieved through provincial exemptions or tokenistic recognition; it requires Indigenous-controlled pedagogy, mentorship, and land-based learning.

Community-led models illustrate this principle in practice. In Listuguj, Mi’gmaq language work has been grounded in participatory and community-led approaches, with community members shaping priorities, pedagogy, and local decision-making for revitalization (Metallic, 2017; Sarkar, 2017; Sarkar et al., 2009). Inuit educators in Nunavik advance similar priorities: MacDonald (2024) argues that second-language instruction must uphold Inuit epistemologies and relational values, positioning English as a supportive tool rather than a colonial imposition. These initiatives exemplify refusal in action; they reject assimilationist frameworks and enact sovereignty through education.

Beyond local programs, Indigenous nations are building institutional futures. Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami’s Inuit Nunangat University, Kiuna College, and Haudenosaunee Universe represent transformative models of Indigenous-governed higher education. These institutions reorient curriculum around Indigenous philosophies, land-based teachings, and intellectual sovereignty, challenging the colonial logic embedded in Quebec’s language regime.

Taken together, these movements reveal that Indigenous-led inclusion is not aspirational; it is already occurring. To support this work, policy must embrace three interconnected commitments:

- Language sovereignty: Recognize Indigenous languages as national languages and fund immersion programs, teacher training, and curriculum development under Indigenous authority.
- Institutional sovereignty: Support Indigenous-governed postsecondary institutions that uphold Indigenous epistemologies and governance structures.
- Multilingual justice: Rejecting linguistic hierarchies that elevate French above Indigenous languages; instead, foster a plurilingual policy grounded in reciprocity and coexistence.

This framework aligns with the TRC's (2015b) Calls to Action, Coulthard's (2014a, 2014b) critique of recognition politics, and Battiste's (2019) call to nourish Indigenous epistemologies. Inclusion, in this vision, is not about integrating Indigenous learners into colonial systems; it is about restructuring those systems so that Indigenous nations determine the terms of education, language governance, and knowledge production. Indigenous-led futures are therefore central to imagining a multilingual, just, and decolonial society.

Conclusion

This paper has argued that Canada's multiculturalism and Quebec's interculturalism, despite their rhetoric of inclusion, remain structurally incapable of addressing Indigenous sovereignty. In Quebec, language laws such as the *Charter of the French Language* (Bill 101) and Bill 96 are presented as neutral mechanisms of cultural protection, yet they operate as settler-colonial instruments that impose linguistic hierarchies and reproduce assimilationist demands on Indigenous peoples. By prioritizing French as the unquestioned "common language," these laws

erase Indigenous language sovereignty and reassert settler authority over education, public life, and social development within Indigenous homelands.

Against this backdrop, Indigenous resistance emerges not as reaction, but as world-making praxis. Through language resurgence, immersion pedagogy, mentorship, legal advocacy, and the creation of Indigenous-governed institutions, Indigenous communities in Quebec enact sovereignty in the present. These practices refuse the colonial politics of recognition and challenge the assumption that justice can be achieved through accommodation within settler frameworks. Instead, they assert Indigenous authority over language, learning, and governance, re-centering responsibilities to land, kinship, and future generations.

Language resurgence, as demonstrated throughout this paper, is not a cultural supplement to state policy; it is a form of Indigenous social development grounded in collective autonomy, dignity, and relational accountability. Community-led immersion schools, participatory language planning, and Indigenous-controlled postsecondary institutions function as sites of resistance where Indigenous epistemologies are nourished and governance is rebuilt. These initiatives reveal that Indigenous futures are not deferred or aspirational; they are already being enacted through everyday practices of refusal and resurgence.

This analysis underscores the limits of interculturalism as a framework for justice in settler-colonial contexts. Meaningful inclusion cannot be achieved through exemptions, symbolic recognition, or consultation that leaves colonial power structures intact. For Indigenous Peoples, justice requires upholding language sovereignty, respecting Indigenous jurisdiction over education, and dismantling linguistic hierarchies that privilege settler nation-building projects. Indigenous resistance exposes these hierarchies and interrupts the narrative that Quebec's language regime is benign or universally applicable.

In alignment with the Journal of Indigenous Social Development's special issue on Indigenous Resistance, this paper affirms that resistance is not solely oppositional but generative, relational, and future-oriented. Indigenous-led language resurgence in Quebec offers a powerful illustration of how communities confront colonial violence while imagining and enacting worlds beyond it. These practices affirm that Indigenous social development is inseparable from sovereignty, and that liberation emerges through collective care, refusal, and the resurgence of Indigenous languages as living systems of law, knowledge, and life.

Indigenous resistance, as articulated here, does not seek inclusion within colonial systems; it transforms the conditions of coexistence. By centering language as a site of struggle and renewal, Indigenous communities assert the right to define their own futures, grounded in sovereignty, dignity, autonomy, and responsibility to the generations yet to come.

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